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AUTHOR Reiter, C. Thomas
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ABSTRACT

Dangers implicit in the recent back-to-basics movement--including a possible swing to the opposite of the open elective programs of the 1960s and a focus on drill and standardized tests--may lead to the neglect of students, who need to understand both the universality of their problems and how to deal with these problems. However, students can gain perspective and wisdom through the study of contemporary literature in a soundly developed set of courses which combines the strengths of the back-to-basics trend and the successful elective programs with a zest for knowledge. Materials for such courses may be adolescent novels, sports books, contemporary poems, song lyrics, television and movie scripts. Students will then be ready to study the classics, such as Dickens and Shakespeare. (JM)

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HOW CAN WE CALL ADOLESCENT LITERATURE, SPORTS LITERATURE, ETC. REAL ENGLISH CLASSES?

C. Thomas Reiter
English Department Chairman, Oak Lawn Community High School
Oak Lawn, Illinois

These are strange times and strained times. They are the times of rising costs, declining enrollments, colleges and universities cranking out more and more young teachers that swell the already massive body of unemployed educators, the accountability craze, a public more knowledgeable about what's going on in schools who think they are more knowledgeable about what ought to be going on, brushfire administrators more and more of whom suffer from the "look out for number one" and "cover your tracks" syndromes, special interest groups who love to light the early fires of four-alarm book burnings, reading scores and simple interest in reading seemingly slumping off. Is it any wonder that all of education, and particularly English Departments, are having bad dreams as they toss and turn, trying to figure out what's going on here, and where we ought to go? And although it's terribly uncomfortable, all of these pressures on us to adopt a solid examinative stance should be viewed in a positive light. We find ourselves in a position we should have been in years and years ago. Too long we were all Miss Doves and Mr. Chips as we blissfully led our students through a sometimes punitive, rigid educational program that was still in its own way candy-coated. No, we are no longer living in those times and thank God they're gone. We find ourselves in a crucial

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period where we must ready ourselves and take a clear stand before the guts of English curriculums are ripped out and put in garbage cans.

Not too long ago, we were in a similar position and our answer came too simply and in many ways too hysterically. So many of us jumped into wide-open, laissez-faire elective programs. Some even wiped out the three-year or four-year English requirement in an idealistic effort to accommodate this beautiful idea. And in many ways, it was beautiful, but most of those ways were on paper or in the hopeful minds of the teachers involved. There is a myriad of reasons why these colorful, experimental approaches seem to have gone down the tubes. Perhaps we expected too much of them. I rather think we did, and as is so often the case, if an action does not live up to all of its expectations, in education or anywhere else, it seems to be a quirk of human nature to throw stones at the whole thing. There is no point, then, in further shooting down these wide-open programs. So many have done that already.

What bothers me is that in shooting down the whole thing, we have left all of the good of these programs out in the hot sun to rot and decay, uncared for, like some fallen animal. And what have we now done in reaction to the apparently unrealized hysterical goals of the 1960's? We have swung all the way over to something affectionately called "back to basics." And so now we must contend with this "back-to-basics" move. In my mind, this move is no less a fad than was the sudden, huge

elective program splash; and if we do not properly contend with it and modify it, we will have swung back too far and will have set ourselves up for another swing too far the other way again.

We must first of all ask ourselves why. Why are we doing this? Why are we panting, staring with glassy eyes at the golden calf of "back to basics"? Well, one of the reasons might be that the business community seems to be expressing some dissatisfaction with the kinds of students we are turning out. I say "seems to," because I'm not sure anyone is certain that the complaint is common in all the nooks and crannies of the business world. Along with many, I have long believed that the business community expects or even depends on us to produce mediocre, shallow-thinking, never-questioning minds; and they grow upset, in fact they cannot handle it if they are not receiving them. It could be, then, that the business moguls are criticizing because we are not cranking out the type of robots they might like.

Still another reason for the "back-to-basics" charge is the apparent decline in national standardized test scores. I do not want to flail around in this abyss, but it is a matter that must be considered here, albeit briefly. In recent years, I have become increasingly aware of the apparent misuse of standardized tests and their results, innocent as it may be. I have seen administrators and teachers take these results and draw conclusions that are not in any way warranted and are not even within the scope of the standardized tests being used. I have heard

administrators and teachers take grade level figures or I.Q. scores and say definitely, "This kid can't do it." I have seen administrators and teachers use standardized test scores, sometimes a year or years old, to slot students into classes, to track them into oblivion. And I am fed up with it! But that is another topic for another time. I mention it here only because the blood-in-the-eyes apostles of "back to basics" are frantically frothing about, waving scores from these tests, saying, "See! See!"

No, in my mind, "back to basics" in its pure form is as radical to the far right as the wide open elective programs were to the far left. Perhaps all that "back to basics" is, is a nostalgic dream of what was, much like <u>American Graffitti</u> or TV's <u>Happy Days</u>; and in clutching it to our bosoms, we are like the cynical, old, self-edifying philosopher who admonishes all within earshot and even those outside, "It's not like it was in the old days," and he preaches for a return to those days. Like any looking back, in the case of the old philosopher or any of us, we see primarily what we want to see; we romanticize it and explode it far beyond what it ever was. Perhaps they were good times, but we cannot recapture them and we should not try. Learn from them? Yes. Recapture them? No.

The "back-to-basics" movement sounds a lot like the TV advertisement for Peak Toothpaste. The ad goes something like "...back in simpler, less complicated times when people brushed with baking soda...If you're too young to remember, try Peak."

The same could be said of education--simpler, less-complicated times--if you're too young to remember--try "back to basics." Just as Peak toothpaste is trendy and probably doing well in spotty areas of our country, probably so will the uncompromising form of "back to basics."

But is it all that harmless, only a waft of melancholy that brings with it fleeting thoughts of re-establishing sanity in an insane world? Absolutely not, for like any radical movement, it is frought with dangers. As Robert W. Boynton, Consulting Editor for the Haydon Book Company says, "The irony of the getting-back-to-basics bit is that for many people it means putting the screws to kids, lining up the desks with a transit, drilling by and with the numbers, naming the parts and missing the whole, checking in and checking up, accounting for the easily accountable and denying the unaccountable. [We cannot equate]... innovation with subversion, fresh insights with flightiness, or individual initiative with surrender." An example of this irony that has already occurred is in the decision in California recently to require for graduation from high school the passing of a basic reading skills test. One of the touchstones of basic reading ability cited there is the ability to read the TV guide.

It should become clear at this point that I am not a ranter and raver of "back to basics." Yet, I do not wish to dismiss it as simply another of education's fads, and I do not mean to reject it summarily. Hardly, for there is good in any movement. Instead, I wish to combine its strongest features with the

strengths of the successful electives programs which are still rattling around in their cages. And to this hunk of quality I wish to add one more key element, a zest for knowledge.

In articles, speeches, discussions, and so forth, hardly anyone mentions knowledge anymore. Pure, undiluted knowledge. It's as if we, in secondary education, turned a deaf ear to the ancient Greeks and scholars throughout history, and turned instead to the theory of application. A student must learn practical writing tips because he must be able to fill out job applications, write resumés, apply for credit. We teach kids to type so they can become secretaries. We instruct kids on data processing, show them how to run a printing press, to prepare a sumptuous lobster dinner, to run conduit in a house, all so they can, upon graduation, immediately enter the world of work, get a job, and make money--make money so they can buy things and therefore enjoy the good life. In fact, we push work/study programs so that the kids can make some money even while they are still in high school, so they can buy clothes, cars, gas, insurance. What has happened to knowledge? What has happened to our helping students struggle through pain and pleasure to that magical moment of learning? And what has happened to our directing students to knowledge, and through knowledge, wisdom, where the students can learn their potentials and limitations as individuals and learn their potentials as human beings? Why must schools prepare students for some mystical, far-off adult world? Why can't we deal with students now

and justify what we are teaching them in terms of now? Students today cannot be led to wisdom with the materials and practices of yesterday. Thus, most will stumble over Shakespeare, realize nothing but frustration from Dickens, and probably too soon fall off the road to knowledge and wisdom. Certainly the Shakespeares and the Dickens and all the other classics are worthwhile and have their places. The question is when. I do not believe the answer is anywhere near the beginning for most students we face on a day-to-day basis. Instead, I believe we can best give this large body of students the most solid push down the wisdom road with different materials, the adolescent novels, the sports books, the contemporary poems and song lyrics, the television and movie scripts, and maybe then, later, introduce them to the classics that have grown in stature through readings upon readings upon readings. It is my belief that one is not led to wisdom by skipping too quickly over the trails along the way. One cannot thrive on the warmth of the house unless it has a foundation. We should extend later, and build now.

So what is the answer to the question in my topic, "How can we call courses like Adolescent Literature and Sports Literature <u>real</u> English courses"? The answer is simple: give them the dignity they deserve. What I am suggesting is a modified, soundly developed set of courses. These should be built by a school's English teachers specifically for their school, so that they will clearly know the answer to that important question that is or ought to be asked constantly, WHY? I am not talking about skills courses,

those geared for development and enhancement of reading, writing, and speaking skills. I am acting under the assumption that no school will ignore these. What I am talking about are the literature segments of a school's English curriculum. And in suggesting such courses as Adolescent Literature, Sports Literature, and Poetry and Contemporary Music, I am serving up only examples, as once again, I must stress that each English Department must build its own.

Most often when I suggest such contemporary courses to proponents of the classics, the courses are pooh-poohed, and I am labeled a pusher of tripe or more euphemistically and more commonly, since honest language is not always a virtue in our profession, a "misguided English instructor whose intentions, anyway, are good." But I contend that the contemporary literature available is far from tripe. Nobody Waved Goodbye, Bless the Beasts and Children, The Kid, My Darling, My Hamburger, Go Ask Alice, Summer of '42, Chocolate War, Bang the Drum Slowly, A Short Season, Grandfather Rock, all of these and scores of others are of excellent quality and offer exciting possibilities for initiating early steps toward wisdom in the young people in our schools.

In a course in Adolescent Literature, we can help kids see that many things are common to all young generations. In the literature of the adolescent, we can show the smothering, despairing void that settles in on all children when the love they desperately need is withheld from them, through Wojciechowska's A Single Light. We can help the kids confront the problems that

occur when one makes people, situations, and events larger than what they are or ought to be, through Wersba's Run Softly, Go Fast and McCullers' The Member of the Wedding. We can examine with them the difficulties in coping with slowly emerging, mysterious, and sometimes newly identifiable personal traits, through Knowles A Separate Peace. We can deal with what it means to be rejected or perceived so and where to go from there, with Zindel's I Never Loved Your Mind. And are these matters crucial or trivial to the development of wisdom as I defined earlier? Is there any question! And at the same time as we are confronting issues crucial to the students we face, we are developing the habit in them of seeing worth in literature, in reading, or seeing that it is possible through books to help oneself plot his own position in the universe, of seeing that Emily Dickinson was not just some wacky hermit when she said, "There is no frigate like a book."

In a course in Sports Literature, students can be shown that the world of sports is microcosmic of all of society. Sports figures are human. They struggle, suffer, and die like all of us do, just as all of us do. Professional athletes have their unions and their strikes, and just as a carpenter's or electrician's strike can paralyze a segment of society, so also can a strike by baseball players or football players or the players of any sport which offers what appears to be a necessary escape, a pressure release for millions and millions of Americans. Through literature dealing with the Olympics, we can clearly

show that the personal driving force necessary to become an Olympic champion is not a whole lot different from the demands of ambition necessary in any facet of society.

Competition in sports is fierce and to the winner go the spoils, as in war, as in business, as in all of life. The choice of materials for a course in Sports Literature is nearly endless. Out of Their League, They Call Me Coach, Run to Daylight, The Quality of Courage, The Contender, Meat on the Hoof, Fear Strikes Out, Winning Is the Only Thing, It's Good to Be Alive, I Am Third are some. Beyond these, all that need be done is to consult with any publisher or distributor, as quality sports literature is exploding. We might even ask the kids. And if we can develop the perception of some truth and some measure of level-headed assessment in our students concerning where they are and where they and their society are going through sports literature, aren't they then better prepared to tackle what some might consider more challenging literary stuff! And even for those students who will never be ready to move to other literature, have we not given them more than they might have gotten from a large anthology which aims its choice of material at some mysterious, indefinable, typical, normal student, whatever that is!

In a course in Poetry and Contemporary Music, the possibilities for exciting learning activities are broad and deep. Is the exhilaration of the English romantic poets really any different from that contained in the lyrics of John Denver? If

discussing love poetry, what better examples are there of the dedication, loyalty, and total giving of self that is love, than in Carole King's "You've Got a Friend" or Paul Simon's "Song for the Asking" and "Bridge Over Troubled Water"? If we are, in our classes, after an understanding of poetic devices, why can't we first turn to the lyrics of today's songwriters, not whole records but simply taped segments? Students can be taught personification through Denver's "...watch the evening tire" (in "Poems, Prayers, and Promises"); they can learn simile through Cat Stevens' "Her eyes like windows, tricklin rain upon her pain...." (in "Sad Lisa"); they can learn metaphor through Elton John's "...you're a star in the face of the sky" (in "Daniel"); they can learn the use of symbols in Neil Diamond's "Shiloh"; they can be led to understand poetic satire through Simon's "7'0'Clock News"; they can see hyperbole in Stevens' "Well you've cracked the sky, scrapers fill the air...." (in "Where Do the Children Play?"); they can feel the beauty and richness of imagery in Don McLean's allegory "American Pie." And the opportunities go on and on.

In suggesting these classes as possible segments of a responsible course of study in a high school English program, I intend them to be viewed as whole courses and not just token activities that we include in the larger scheme of things to show our kids that we are "relevant" or "with it." No, I intend them as serious studies of serious subject matter, as a foundationary base for the same kinds of quality learning experiences

teachers have for years and years introduced in their classrooms.

And so we are in a crucial time in our English Departments as we attempt to develop a clear sense of where we are going and why. Noted author Hans P. Guth warns us that we are currently "witnessing a confused retreat." He says, "In the name of basic skills and basic literacy, we see a revival of methods and routines that the profession abandoned because they DID NOT WORK--because they were, for many or most of our students, wrongly based, counterproductive, pervasively negative in their whole orientation."

Again and again, I am hearing and reading of schools and teachers who seem to be going back to Guth's "abandoned methods and routines" in their classes and using the shopworn motive that "we must prepare our students for college and life." In fact, I suspect such schools and teachers relish the opportunity to do so again unchallenged, perhaps even cheered, since such methods and routines are infinitely easier. Yet this reason has never seemed valid to me and still doesn't. Decades ago, John Dewey railed against this reason and his thoughts are certainly still applicable. So also are the views of Benjamin Franklin, who said that schools should be "delightful places." Although it is much more difficult to teach contemporary courses like those I have described, and the teachers doing so are risking some of themselves, these courses are much more meaningfully justified in terms of NOW, and are therefore much more positive forces to today's students as they journey toward their own wis-

doms.

I used to think that if we could introduce Shakespeare into the ghettos of young people's minds, somehow this would bring the world to peace. He was the pinnacle, the best literary history had to offer, the one writer whom all people always knew, or claimed they did. Now I believe this is not true, that my fondest peace-bringing dreams were not only impossible in this manner, but in some ways contributory to more frustration than what was already there. I have come to lean first toward the Adolescent Literatures, the Sports Literatures, the Poetry and Contemporary Musics, as I have altered my approach without tempering my idealism. And later, if later, to the classics.

What I have offered up here are only some thoughts of concern and a few suggestions. I freely admit that I have no foolproof answers. However, far more distressing to me are those who think they do.

Submitted by: C. Thomas Reiter
English Department Chairman
Oak Lawn Community High School
94th and Southwest Highway
Oak Lawn, Illinois 60453

Home Address: 8 West Eureka
Lemont, Illinois 60439